

INTERNATIONAL EXECUTIVE REVIEW



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Bulletin #57: Biden inches towards authorising Storm Shadows in Russia

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Biden inches towards authorising Storm Shadows in Russia

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6–7 minutes

Storm Shadow, Britain's highly-prized, air-launched cruise missile, is not going to win the war for Kyiv against the Russian invaders. However, this particular weapon, along with the American ATACMS (Army Tactical Missile System) are literally waiting in the wings for Kyiv to launch a new-style, more deadly and more provocative strike on air bases and missile sites deep inside Russia. They could transform the near-31-month war into the biggest confrontation between Moscow and the West since the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962.

President Putin has warned that if authority is given for these weapons to be used against targets inside Russia, it would mean war between Russia and Nato. Storm Shadow, a heavyweight weapon with a range of more than 150 miles, and ATACMS which can reach 190 miles, have already played significant roles in the war, but exclusively against Russian targets in occupied eastern Ukraine and Russia-annexed Crimea.

Ever since the start of the Russian invasion on 24 February, 2022, the US-led coalition supporting Kyiv has ploughed billions of dollars' worth of weapons and ammunition to the Ukrainian military to fight off the Russian aggressors – in the hope of protecting Ukraine's sovereignty. However, there was from the beginning a proviso, set in stone by President Biden., that the weapons which progressively became more advanced and more sophisticated should be used to defend Ukraine from attack, not deployed to mount over-the-border strikes into Russia itself.

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To Kyiv this made no military sense. If Moscow could launch attacks on Ukrainian cities from the safety of the Russian motherland – stand-off cruise missiles fired by bombers well away from Ukrainian air defences- then why should Ukraine not do likewise and hit the very bases inside Russia from where the strikes originated.

A basic military maxim is that you hit the enemy where it hurts the most. But Biden said no, fearful of pushing Putin too far, down the nuclear escalatory road. Other members of the pro-Ukraine coalition went along with Biden's edict, although with less enthusiasm in London.

All that has now changed, and for a number of reasons. First, Biden is slowly becoming persuaded that Russia deserves to be targeted in retaliation for the huge increase in destructive missile strikes on Ukrainian cities, and, in particular, attacks by heavy precision-guided glide bombs that can weigh up to three tons.

Second, Ukraine is developing its own longer-range missiles which will be capable of hitting targets inside Russia. Kyiv already possesses long-range armed drones which have had some notable successes in striking Russian sites, although with only limited explosive warheads. Under this reasoning, the US and UK would just be contributing towards Ukraine's own home-grown weapons capability.

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Third, there is a growing confidence, albeit with an element of having one's fingers crossed, that Putin is never going to resort to using tactical nukes against Ukraine. The West sent battle tanks and F-16 fighter aircraft, both supposedly red-line escalatory moves in Putin's mind, but his warnings of dire consequences proved to be bluster.

Fourth, Iran has sent hundreds more short-range ballistic missiles to Russia, all of which will be used to hit Ukrainian civilian and military targets. Although Iran had sent ballistic missiles to Moscow earlier in the year, the continuing flow of such systems between Tehran and Moscow has begged the question: if Moscow can get arms from an overseas ally for use against Ukraine, why shouldn't Kyiv be allowed to fire Western long-range missiles at Russian targets, wherever they might be.

This is where Storm Shadow and ATACMS have come into play. Both are highly effective weapons which, with the benefit of their longer range, could cause significant damage to the bases from where Russia is currently launching aircraft with their payload of deadly glide bombs.

The new Labour government in Britain clearly wants to be on the front foot as far as the war in Ukraine is concerned, and already appears to be persuaded that Storm Shadow, a

Franco-British weapon which has performed to all expectations since its introduction into Ukraine last year, should be used to help Kyiv strike at legitimate targets inside Russia. David Lammy, the foreign secretary, and Antony Blinken, the US secretary of state, who were in Kyiv together this week, appear to be of the same mind, that now is the time to concede to President Zelensky's long-argued wishes for the US and UK to remove the caveat covering the use of these weapons.

In Washington DC yesterday, Keir Starmer met Biden to discuss the Storm Shadow issue, and left without the approval that he badly wanted. The final decision, he hinted, could be taken at the United Nations General Assembly at the end of the month.

Putin has only just got round to sending infantry and marine brigades to try and push Ukrainian troops out of the Kursk region in western Russia which they invaded last month. What would the Russian leader do if Western F-16s flew bombing raids with Storm Shadow cruise missiles over the border? Would it mean war between Russia and Nato? Does the West back down or call Putin's bluff? It will be the biggest decision Biden has to make in his last four months as president. 